

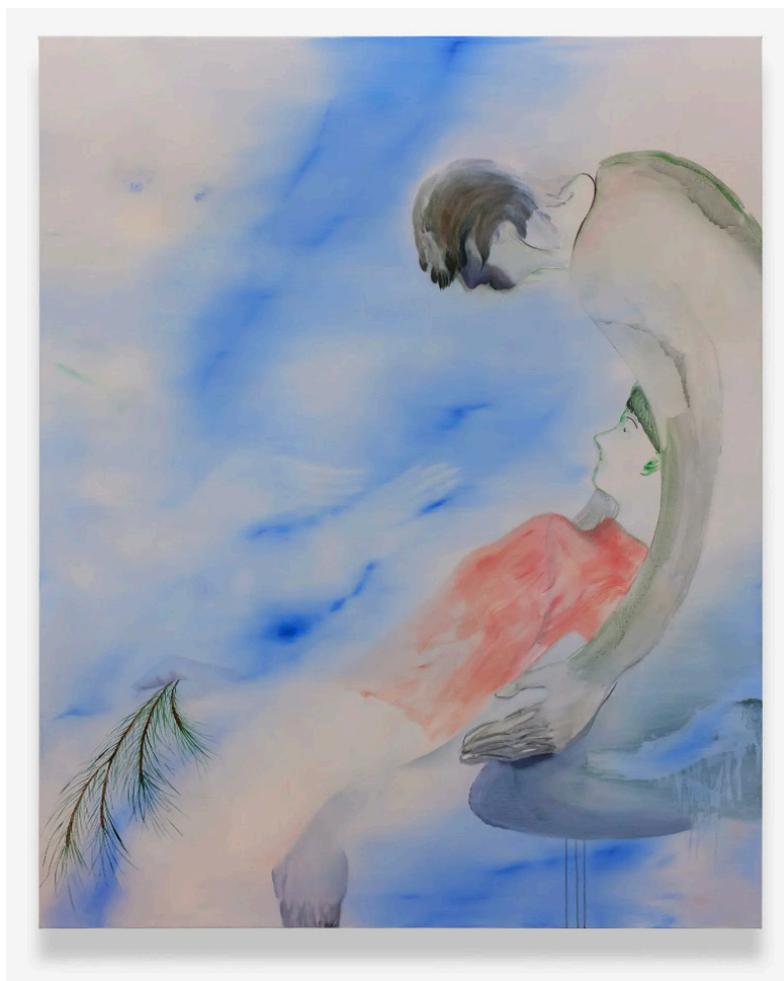
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A Prehistoric Sculpture Inspires a Tokyo Gallery

The Taka Ishii Gallery's "Hybrid Figures" presentation at Paris+ by Art Basel features works compatible with Lion Man, a 40,000-year-old figure.

By David Belcher



"Cure" (2022) by Hiroka Yamashita will be shown by Taka Ishii Gallery, of Tokyo, at Paris+ by Art Basel. The artist and Taka Ishii Gallery

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For its debut at [Paris+ by Art Basel](#), the [Taka Ishii Gallery](#) in Tokyo decided to go back — way back — in artistic history for some inspiration. As a theme for the fair, the gallery chose the so-called Lion Man sculpture found in a German cave in 1939 and believed to be up to 40,000 years old.

What makes that image so compelling for Taka Ishii, the gallery's owner, is that it is a hybrid figure: the body of a man and the head of a lion. Other ancient artwork, such as the famous drawings in [the Lascaux caves of France](#), are often just images of the known world. But Lion Man is clearly a human portrayal of a more evolved figure: that of a godlike or made-up figure beyond the everyday creatures that roamed the earth thousands of millenniums ago.

Mr. Ishii used that idea to invite four artists to create new works for Paris+, and he drew upon artwork from five other artists for his idea of “Hybrid Figures.” Mr. Ishii wanted to honor the true origins of artwork: Lion Man is referred to as the first artistic image, cut from a mammoth bone, created by a human being, though a painting of three wild pigs, [believed to be 45,000 years old](#), was discovered last year in Indonesia.

“I imagined that 40,000 years ago this could be similar to the Buddhist statue because it's a figure that is almost maybe godlike,” Mr. Ishii said. “It's interesting that in such a prehistoric time that there was creativity. It's timeless beauty.”

That beauty inspired [Ataru Sato](#), a Japanese painter based in Tokyo, but not in an obvious way. The challenge of creating a hybrid figure spoke to his usual approach of many figures mingling, often quite randomly and intensely. For “Hybrid Figures,” Mr. Sato went big. His painting “Maison hantée” took

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three months to paint, and the dozens of images, many of them quite disturbing and Dalíesque, reflect the state of the world, he said.

“This was inspired by a haunted mansion at a summer fair in Japan during a summer from my childhood,” he explained. “The world scares me because there are so many bad things and sad things going on right now.”

But he wanted to portray that fear and, in a way, release it. Whereas he did not create any actual image that could be seen as a hybrid figure of part man, part animal, the act of painting something so complex seem to take on a life of its own — almost like a third being.

“I’m trying to understand what can be born as a hybrid of me and the world, which for me is the third entity,” Mr. Sato explained. “The painting is the outcome that emerged between me and the world. I’m not trying to overcome my fears so much as understand what they are.”

The 10 artists represented at the gallery’s Paris+ booth range from photographers to painters to sculptors: Tomoo Gokita, Sanya Kantarovsky, Mr. Sato and Hiroka Yamashita created new pieces. Mr. Ishii chose works by Nobuyoshi Araki and Sean Landers, and arranged works from the estates of Tatsuo Ikeda, Goro Kakei and Kansuke Yamamoto, who are deceased.

Mr. Ishii said the collection took on a surreal tone, which seemed appropriate to the hybrid subject matter as well as the moment.

“Surrealism is very popular right now,” he said. “The [Venice Biennale is doing a lot of surrealism.](#)”

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The works of two particular artists, both deceased, seemed like natural fits for “Hybrid Figures,” Mr. Ishii said.

“We show some of the works by the photographer Kansuke Yamamoto,” he said, whose works appeared at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2013. “We include one of his most famous works from that era, ‘A Peculiar Grounding,’ which is a very surreal photo of the skeleton of an animal mixed with a human body. It works perfectly.”

Similarly, the works of the Japanese avant-garde artist Tatsuo Ikeda, who died in 2020, include a fish but with a human face.

“It’s purely coincidental that we have deceased artists in this collection,” Mr. Ishii said. “Historical artwork doesn’t look old to me. It can look very fresh.”

For the painter [Hiroka Yamashita](#), also making her debut at Paris+ with four oil-on-linen works, the inspiration for “Hybrid Figures” was similar to how she approaches many of her other works.

“Sometimes artists have a concrete plan, but for this art fair I improvised after Taka sent me the statement about his hybrid concept,” Ms. Yamashita said. “I started with my brush and some different colored paints, and they began to dissolve and started to look like a face and body parts.”

The hybrid idea helped each painting take on its own identity, she said. What evolved was not unlike some of her previous landscape works, where it is not always about the viewer’s looking out at the landscape so much as the landscape’s looking back, she explained. That took on new meaning when thinking about a 40,000-year-old piece of artwork that may well express an early human’s desire for

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a shamanlike figure in a world of awe-inspiring and terrifying landscapes.

“What I do in my work is gaze from the natural world or from a landscape back at humans and how we exist in a multidimensional world,” she said. “I try to visualize how humans act but really try to show the human desire for a spiritual connection.”